

Dr. King Is Chosen to Lead

Montgomery Bus Boycott



Associated Press

Rosa Parks, whose refusal to move to the back of a Montgomery bus in 1955 led to boycott, is fingerprinted.

By Jim Bishop

Rosa Parks' feet ached. She was not complaining, even to herself, but it seemed that life as seamstress consisted of nothing more than crouching on her toes, with a mouth full of pins, before white women who were dissatisfied. All she wanted now after a day's work was a seat on a bus.

When it came, Mrs. Parks followed the rule for "colored folks" and found a seat in the fifth row left, directly behind the first four rows for the "white folks." The bus started, moved a little, and stopped. More blacks got aboard, plus a few whites. Mrs. Parks didn't look up to note that all the seats were now filled.

A few whites stood up front. "All right, all right," said the driver, looking at Mrs. Parks and two other blacks. "Come on. Get in the back." Rosa Parks looked up at the strong white man at her side, waiting.

"No," she said. "I won't."

Rosa Parks was not frightened. She had been secretary of the local NAACP chapter for years, and she was attuned to race relations and knew the difference between the loud and the ominous. This threat was ominous. The bus driver left to look for a policeman.

There was seldom a confrontation except once in a while between an intoxicated Negro and a surly driver. This was different. An apparently gentle person had given the driver a flat no. If the word got around Montgomery that a small woman had successfully defied a bit white man on the bus, well, this would not be Dec. 1, 1955, it would be hallelujah day all over the city.

Mrs. Parks was charged with violation of a Montgomery City ordinance governing racial accommodation on publicly owned vehicles. These complaints were usually handled, and handled well for the whites, under the much broader and vaguer term "Disorderly conduct."

But the officer had written a racial complaint, and now, for better or for worse, the City of Montgomery had only one way out of the dilemma created by the "separate but equal facilities" dictum of the Supreme Court in 1954, and that was to acquit her. However, if that were done, it would spread

through "Colored Town" and lead to more violations.

Within an hour of Mrs. Parks' imprisonment, the news was traveling. For help, Mrs. Parks required the services of a black champion, and she could have done better than E. D. Nixon, a burly Pullman porter, who had been a leader in almost every fight for black rights in Montgomery in the decade.

Nixon bailed out Rosa Parks. "This," he said happily, "is what we've been waiting for." He asked her if she was willing to be the "symbolic case." She said yes.

Nixon called black leaders all night. Shortly after 5 a.m. he noticed among the list of clergy that there was no check mark against the name "M. L. King Jr." Nixon had no time to persuade. He explained what had happened and asked King to be a member of the committee for a one-day boycott. There was silence on the phone. "Brother Nixon," said King, "let me think it out awhile. Call me back."

Later King said, "The apparent apathy of Negro ministers presented a special problem." Another observer was more succinct: "They were busy preaching God and raising their salaries." Nixon might have declined to call back, but he took a chance on a refusal. He called King to ask if he had reached a decision. The pastor agreed to serve on the committee. The Rev. Dr. King did not tell Nixon that, between phone calls, he had solicited the advice of his new friend, the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy. Abernathy said, "Join." King joined.

Nixon's group drew up a leaflet calling for a black bus boycott for Monday, Dec. 5, the day of the trial. The Rev. Dr. King got out 7,000 additional leaflets—now that he was in, he was going to go all the way.

There was a bus stop a few feet from the King house. The first bus that Monday was due at 6 a.m. When it came Coretta King's face was ecstatic as she pointed: "It's empty!"

They waited at the front window for fifteen minutes. The next bus crept by, empty. The third bus went by. It held two white passengers.

Dr. King ran to the family car and drove down one bus line street and up another. He kept cruising during the peak morning hour and

counted eight blacks in all the buses. He kept telling himself solemnly that a miracle—a real miracle—had occurred.

In court, Mrs. Parks was defended by Fred D. Gray, a black attorney. The prosecution argued that there was a municipal ordinance dividing the black race from the white on public conveyances and that the defendant did, in fact, violate that ordinance willfully.

"Ten dollars' fine," the judge said, hardly looking up from his desk blotter, "and four dollars' cost of court." Gray respectfully informed the judge that the decision would be appealed. "Duly noted," His Honor said. The lawyer and the women were elated. For a pittance, \$14, it was possible that the white prosecution had made a \$100 billion

error. Besides, there was that glorious happy bus boycott.

That afternoon the ministers held a meeting with other leaders before the evening church meeting. The entire assemblage, including Martin Luther King Jr., was surprised to hear a voice say, "Mr. President, I would like to nominate Rev. M. L. King for president." King was elected unanimously. The new president later told friends that he was so astonished that he had no tongue to decline; that if he had had time to think it through, he would have declined the office.

Names for the new organization were suggested and discarded. It was Ralph Abernathy who said, "How about the Montgomery Improvement Association?" It was adopted.

The cab drivers were charging ten cents apiece—the same as the bus fare—to jam five or six persons into each vehicle and drive them downtown. If the city threatened to invalidate their licenses, the movement would be crippled.

The commissioners challenged the legality of altering the bus loading system because it was part of municipal law. "You are asking us," one said, "to violate the law." No one stood to say, "No, sir. We are asking you to change the law."

Neither side desired a long fight, but when the city notified the black taxi companies that mass riding was illegal, the flames were fanned. Mayor Gayle and Commissioner Sellers suddenly joined the White Citizens Council as a lesson to the blacks. The net effect was that the battle lines were drawn honestly.

One evening King and Bob Williams, a Morehouse classmate, drove downtown. A policeman stopped the car and asked to see Dr. King's license.

Another policeman peered through the wetness and said, "It's that damn King fellow." The minister showed his license, said nothing, and was permitted to go on. A motorcycle cop followed.

At the first stop, the cop pulled alongside and said, "Get out, King. You're under arrest for doing thirty in a twenty-five-mile zone."

Meekly, he got out. The cop frisked him and called headquarters. A patrol car arrived and took him to the Montgomery City Jail. At the desk where he was booked, King's arm was held up between his shoulder blades so that his head went down to the blotter to alleviate the pain.

The word spread through the city that King was in jail. Ralph Abernathy left a meeting with cash in his pocket, went to the jail and asked to bail King out. The officer in charge glanced at a clock and said, "You'll have to wait until tomorrow."

"I am the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Montgomery," Abernathy said loftily. "Do you mean to tell me I can't sign bond?"

"No," the officer said absently, "you sure can't."

"Can I see Dr. King?"

The officer shook his head no. Abernathy went back to the churches and told the pastors, preachers, and deacons to assemble at once at

the city jail. Again, the blacks responded to the call.

The warden became nervous. He phoned his superiors. Dr. King was hustled out of the cell, fingerprinted and mugged, and told, "All right, King. You're being released on your own recognizance. Now get out." Later he told his wife that he had been frightened.

Monday, January 30, 1956 —9:30 p.m.— Coretta King and a friend, Mary Williams, were waiting for King to return home. Once or twice he had mentioned the possibility of an attack on the house with her and the baby alone in it — but Coretta was unimpressed.

The women were sitting in the front room when they heard a thump outside the windows, as though someone had tossed a rock on the porch. Coretta King, calm but also aware of the possibilities, said, "It sounds as though someone hit the front of the house. Let's move to the back." They didn't reach it. They heard a clap of thunder and felt the floor shudder. A smoky sulfuric smell rushed through the rooms.

King was called from the pulpit. By the time he reached home the mob was enormous and police cars were parked askew in the area. Mayor Gayle and Commissioner Sellers were on King's front porch when he managed to force his way through. In the kitchen, he saw his wife holding the baby. "Thank God you and the baby are all right."

The crowd began to shout insults at the police. The police did not respond, at their hands were on the butts of their guns. They were not looking for trouble, but if trouble started, they wanted to save themselves. No one could control a crowd this size.

Martin Luther King stepped to the front of his porch. He held up both arms and in a loud slow voice, King said, "My wife and my baby are all right. I want you people to go home and put down your weapons. We cannot solve problems with violence." There was a pause. "We must meet violence with nonviolence."

Some shouted "amen!" others yelled: "God bless you, Reverend." They began to disperse.

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Tomorrow: Victory.

The first crack in the facade came on Wednesday. The Alabama Human Relations Council asked for a conference between the city and bus officials on one side and King and his executive committee on the other. The blacks arrived at the commission chamber fifteen minutes early. J. E. Bagley and Jack Crenshaw of the bus company came in and sat at the end of the commissioners' table. At the stroke of eleven, Mayor W. A. Gayle, Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers, and Commissioner Frank A. Parks walked in.

Mayor Gayle turned a stern judicious eye on the blacks and said, "Who's the spokesman?" The blacks were intimidated. They said nothing. Committeemen turned to stare at Martin Luther King. "All right,"

the mayor said, "come forward and make your statement."

King sat at the opposite end of the table from Bagley and Crenshaw. He said he wanted to make it clear at once that Rosa Parks was not the cause of the boycott; her arrest had merely precipitated the fight for human rights. "Our action," he said slowly, "is the culmination of a series of injustices and indignities that have existed over the years. . . . Courtesy," he said, "is the least any business can grant to its patrons."

The mayor opened the meeting to general discussion. Police Commissioner Sellers said, in an aside, that the taxi companies had a license ruling that they could not charge less than forty-five cents per ride. King understood the threat.